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Response of the School of Psychology, University of Sydney to the Issue Paper on Establishing an Institute of Open Adoption

The School of Psychology at the University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Issue Paper 'Establishing an Institute of Open Adoption'. The views put forward in this document constitute the School's recommendations for developing the criteria for awarding the tender to establish the Institute. The report was prepared by Dr Irina Harris, Senior Research Fellow in Cognitive Neuroscience; Dr David Hawes, Senior Lecturer in Child Clinical Psychology; Dr Betty Luu, Postdoctoral Researcher in Developmental Psychology; and Dr Micah Goldwater, Lecturer in Developmental Psychology and Cognition.

The School of Psychology welcomes the decision of the NSW government to establish an Institute in Open Adoption that will undertake research and educational activities in the area of open adoption. Based on the research available (most of it from overseas), we are of the firm opinion that adoption is the best option for children who, for whatever reason, cannot live with their biological parents. In NSW, the majority of these children are children who have entered the out-of-home care (OOHC) system via child protection services. The available research strongly indicates that adoption, especially for children under the age of 5, provides the stability and permanency that allows healthy development of attachment to a new family and leads to better outcomes in terms of educational attainment and a stable and productive future. Open adoption, in particular, fosters the healthy development of personal identity. It is less clear whether adoption confers the same benefits for older children, and this is an area where future research would be extremely beneficial.

Below we summarise what we see as the most important functions that a new Institute of Open Adoption should serve and make some suggestions as to how these areas of practice could be structured to enable the Institute to function, and to leverage funding that will support its function, beyond the initial period of seed funding provided by the NSW government.

1. Governance structure

We strongly support the proposal that the future Institute of Open Adoption should be completely independent of the government and any government department, both in spirit and its implementation. This will ensure that the activities of the Institute can continue without disruption from changes of government and changing policy "fashions". It should also maintain an open and responsive attitude towards collaborative opportunities with interested parties that fit the research and practice agenda of the Institute, so as to

maximise its access to a variety of funding opportunities and new research directions as the need arises.

Given the various potential roles of such an Institute (as well as its eventual funding fate), it is hard to make recommendations on its structure. This will depend on which aspects of practice the Institute ends up focussing on. Nevertheless, we feel that it would be beneficial for the Institute to have an independent advisory board drawing on a wide range of inter-disciplinary expertise. This could include, but not be limited to, individuals with expertise in child development, social work and policy development, individuals with personal experience of adoption, members of the legal profession, charity sector, and business, that are separate from the researchers and practitioners involved in the core business of the centre.

Given the terms of its brief, the Institute is likely to be a collaborative enterprise between one or more agencies operating in the adoption space and university-based researchers. It may be advantageous to have the Institute hosted by a university, as this could provide access to a range of support services that already exist within university structures. These could include administrative support and advice for funding applications and management of research funds, access to e-platforms managed by the university for the dissemination of information, institutional ethics boards, and an established framework for managing intellectual property generated by the Institute. Such services could lessen the administrative burden of the running operation of the Institute and free up additional funds to be used for other activities.

2. Research

High quality research should be the top priority of the Institute. As well as being critically important in its own right, it is also the basis for evidence-based practice and education of both professionals and the community in matters of adoption and its consequences.

2.1. Interdisciplinary teams

We believe that research in this area is best accomplished through collaborations between practitioners working in child protection and OOHC services and academic researchers in a variety of fields, including (though not necessarily limited to) social work, psychology, law, social policy and government studies. The former have the hands-on experience and understanding of the practical issues, while the latter bring disciplinary knowledge and expertise in current research practice, as well as independence from the actual practice (and are, thus, free from potential conflicts of interest).

Such a combination of research investigators would also be an ideal mix for facilitating access to funding schemes that target collaborations between university-based researchers and industry partners, such as the Linkage Projects scheme administered by the Australian Research Council or Partnership Projects administered by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

2.2. Expertise in child development

We see it as crucial that much of the research activities of the Institute be informed by up-to-date knowledge and expertise in child development. This is a fundamentally important issue that could easily be overlooked when designing and implementing policy and service

delivery. For example, we know that children of different ages have different needs for information as their understanding of adoption changes (Brodzinsky, 2011), and that children generally become increasingly discerning of who they wish to acquire information from (Harris, 2012). As children's needs change as they mature, it is essential that the Institute examines adoption-related issues in accordance with what is already known about child development, and that children's experiences of adoption are considered in a developmentally appropriate manner. Therefore, we recommend that an Institute of this kind should ensure that research design on issues related to open adoption consider the needs experienced by children at different stages of development as they navigate their adoption journey (i.e., from pre- to post-adoption).

2.3. Maintaining a broad research agenda

At the same time, care should be taken to ensure that the research agenda for the Institute is not limited to applied research questions related to the impact of adoption practices on children and families. Rather, we recommend that the research agenda include questions that may directly or indirectly inform understanding of the development of high-risk children, yet do not necessarily explicitly aim to offer direct implications for adoption practices. Such an approach will not only support the sustainability of the Institute through competitive research funding, but will maximise the likelihood that research activities will produce significant and meaningful advances that stand to benefit high-risk children in the long-term.

As such, we would see much value in establishing a research agenda that encompasses research into the broader risk and protective processes through which caregiving practices shape the outcomes of high-risk children. This might include, for example, research into the processes through which caregiving practices promote the early development of executive functions among children who have been exposed to maltreatment. Other potential examples include topics concerning the interplay between caregiving processes (e.g., attachment, parent-child interactions) and child-level characteristics (e.g., temperament, bio-behavioural markers) with respect to distinct trajectories of child psychopathology and health. Another topic could be the kinds of "natural" interactions between parents and children and how they lead to success in school (e.g., the ways in which parents read to their kids, or talk to them while they play, is predictive of early literacy, mathematical, and spatial reasoning skills). A question of interest might be to examine whether there are important differences between adopted and fostered child-and-parent interactions in these domains, and if there are, how to train adopting parents to engage with children in ways that we know to be beneficial for cognitive development and school success. Translational research investigating novel parenting interventions informed by current developmental neuroscience should also be encouraged.

In addition to establishing a research agenda that encompasses such research questions, we would propose that a track record in research of this kind should be emphasised among the criteria for awarding the tender.

3. Education and Training

We recommend that another core activity of the future Institute should be the education and training of future practitioners in the open adoption space, with research evidence guiding the implementation of best practice. An effective way to deliver this would be through

research-informed teaching within units of study in undergraduate or post-graduate courses that could be taken as electives by students from a variety of degree programmes (e.g., psychology, social work, law, philosophy and ethics, medicine, political science, etc). Thus, future practitioners in all these domains could gain knowledge and understanding of the issues and challenges of open adoption as part of their professional training. This would help to shift some of the pervasive anti-adoption culture amongst practitioners working in a range of child protection services.

In addition, the Institute could also offer focused workshops delivered to non-government agencies that administer OOHC or to government departments. We envisage that these further training courses and workshops could be delivered for a fee, providing a potential additional income stream.

Furthermore, exposure of the Institute's research activities through involvement in undergraduate teaching could serve to attract Honours and PhD students into the research activities of the Institute, which would contribute to the long-term sustainability of the research enterprise.

4. Clearing house of information for the adoption community (broadly construed)

Generating knowledge through high quality research and communicating this knowledge to the academic and professional community are two extremely important missions that should be achieved by an Institute of Open Adoption. We recommend that a third, equally important, aspect should consist of communicating this material to the general community. We see a critical role for this Institute in providing information for a whole range of people whose lives are touched by adoption: adopted individuals, adoptive families, birth family members, friends of adoptees, as well as people likely to encounter adoption-related issues, such as school teachers and counsellors, to name a few.

We recommend that part of the activities of the Institute be the creation and maintenance of a library of resources (preferably online and readily accessible), such as:

- Lay summaries of research findings in the adoption space.
- More general social developmental and emotional issues that are likely to affect adopted persons and their families (e.g., attachment, behavioural and emotional disturbances, cognitive development).
- Personal testimonies from adopted individuals, adoptive parents and even birth family members, describing their experiences of adoption.
- Information about how to navigate the complexities of the legal issues related to adoption.
- Information about community support groups for adopted persons, their families, and for birth families whose children have been adopted.
- Advice about managing contact with birth family.

In addition to making these resources available through a website (e.g. similar to the Raising Children Network), the Institute could also act as a referral point to specific specialised services, including psychologists, counsellors, and legal professionals with expertise in adoption.

In addition, we envisage that the Institute could provide (as fee-for-service) independent reviews and evaluations of existing services in line with research-informed best practice.

5. Adoption as relating to Indigenous children

A final issue what we would like to provide comment on, even though it is not part of the brief of the Issue Paper, is that of adoption of Indigenous children. We are mindful of the fact that adoption of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children is a culturally complex and sensitive issue. However, if one accepts the premise that adoption offers the best outcomes for children in the child protection system and OOHC, then maintaining a default position of excluding Indigenous children from this permanency option seems to us to perpetuate the disadvantage gap experienced by children of Indigenous background.

In light of this, we would like to encourage the future Institute of Open Adoption to engage with the question of whether adoption might be also a desirable outcome for Indigenous children. This issue would require careful research and community consultation. An independent institute without a perceived political agenda would be best placed to initiate such research and consultation. At a minimum, we would recommend that Indigenous children should not be excluded from research projects aimed at evaluating different forms of care, for example, or social-developmental outcomes of such care arrangements. Research addressing the needs of Aboriginal children with respect to adoption could also expand the funding options of the Institute, by providing access to additional sources of research support, such as the Australian Research Council's Discovery Indigenous scheme.

We therefore recommend that a demonstrated willingness and ability to engage with these issues should be among the desirable criteria for awarding the tender.

References

Brodzinsky, D. M. (2011). Children's understanding of adoption: Developmental and clinical implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 42(2), 200–207.

Harris, P. L. (2012). *Trusting what you're told: How children learn from others*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.